DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 548 SO 011 896

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TITLE Person Perception in Male-Female Communication: Theory and Cultural Qualifier.
INSTITUTION San Jose State Univ., Calif.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research Conference (Mexico City, Mexico, March 2-9, 1979) ; Document prepared through the Department of Speech Communication

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; Behavior Theories; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Factors; Females; *Interaction Process Analysis; Males; Role Perception; *Sex Differences; Sociocultural Patterns; *Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Heider (F N)

ABSTRACT

The paper suggests that culturally determined patterns of perception should be related to Fritz Heider's attribution theory in order to understand differences of perception in male-female interaction. The first section explains Heider's theory as a complex process in which past experiences with the person or act may influence perceptions. For instance, a stumble by a person "known" to be clumsy will be perceived as a clumsy act, whereas an action perceived as "aggressive" may lead the observer to attribute aggressiveness to the actor's personality. The second section applies the theory to the professional situation and the home setting, using one specific sex difference -- patterns of interruption--as an illustration. In order to be heard at a board meeting, for example, a woman may have to speak more loudly than usual. This action may cause the men present to view the interruption as more important than the woman intended; the woman may become known as an aggressive, pushy person. In the home situation, interruption by the wife may be interpreted as "bitchiness" or the blame may be placed on the environment, i.e., pushy feminist influences. The third section discusses field sensitivity and field independence in assessing cross-cultural applicability of Heider's theory. These cultural patterns of perception refer to the tendency to synthesize or to analyze elements in the perceptual field. Heider's theory implies the superiority of the field independent or analytic approach. Thus, his theory should be reconsidered with particular attention given to whether and how sexes and cultures differ in perceptions.
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This paper is an adaptation and expansion of a section of a paper presented to the VIth International Colloquium on Verbal Communication, Berndorf, Austria, 1978.

Person Perception in Male Female Communication: Theory and Cultural Qualifier

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Previous studies have suggested that males and females in the United States differ in several aspects of communicative behavior. The present paper attempts to answer the question of how these differences may influence communication between the sexes. Heider's attribution theory is briefly summarized and one specific sex difference -- patterns of interruption -- is used to illustrate it. The theory is then applied to the professional situation and to the home situation. The authors conclude by suggesting that field sensitivity and field independence, culturally determined patterns of perception, need to be related to Heider's theory in order to understand cultural differences of perception in male-female interaction.

Percepción de personas en la comunicación entre hombres y mujeres: Teoría y calificación cultural

Sharon Ruhly
Jo Sprague

Por medio de estudios anteriores se ha concluido que los hombres y las mujeres en los Estados Unidos se comunican en maneras distintas. Esta presentación trata de responder a la pregunta ¿cómo son influidos por estas diferencias las interacciones entre hombres y mujeres? La teoría de atribución de Heider se sintetiza y, para aclararla, se usa una diferencia específica (i.e., la de las interrupciones). Después, la teoría se aplica a las situaciones profesionales y domésticas. Las autoras concluyen, diciendo que necesitamos pensar en los conceptos de "field sensitivity" y "field independence" para entender las diferencias culturales de percepción en las interacciones entre hombres y mujeres.

Researchers have recently begun to turn their attention to differences between the communication patterns of males and females. Old stereotypes are coming under scrutiny and conclusions--albeit tentative in nature--are being offered.[1] Not surprisingly, men and women differ in their verbal and nonverbal communication patterns.[2]

Knowledge about the difference in communicative behavior between two groups is potentially useful information. Alone, however, it is insufficient to explain what occurs when members of the two groups interact with each other. Too frequently the literature on male female communication has stopped short of such an explanation--a criticism which, incidentally, has also been leveled against the literature on intercultural communication.[3] However, in the absence of great bodies of research on the interaction between two specific groups, it is possible to combine the research on differences with theories about person perception and offer a tentative explanation for what may occur in the mixed group setting. In this paper we present a brief overview of a theory of attribution in person perception. We then use this theory to explain how specific differences in behavior may influence male-female interaction. Last, we discuss field sensitivity and field independence in perception as important qualifiers to this theory.

Attribution Theory

> Fritz Heider approaches person perception from the orientation that
>
> the principles involved in [studies of the processes of organization in the perceptual field] can be applied profitably to the perception of other persons and their behavior, and that one of the features of the organization of the social field [italics ours] is the attribution of change to a perceptual unit.[4]

When something in our environment directly impinges upon us, we attempt to

attribute its occurrence to a causal agent. Persons are frequently perceived as the final causal link--as the origin of a given action. This tendency often can lead to an underestimation of other factors responsible for the effect or action.[5] Therefore, although it is possible to attribute any action to self, to the other, or to the environment, the tendency is to attribute the act to self or other.

In person perception, as in object perception, there is a need for constancy. A person may produce a variety of acts. We may be in contact with the acts over a period of time. To give these acts some degree of stability within our consciousness, we associate them with traits or characteristics. Thus, we have aggressive acts or meek acts. The same trait terms can also be associated with individuals, reinforcing the notion of a link between person and act. We then may infer a characteristic of an act from the trait of a person and vice versa. A bad person produces a bad act or a bad act is necessarily produced by a bad person. This interplay is reinforced over time.

In the process of social perception, origin and act are seen as part of an integrated unit. As Heider suggests,

> it is known, from the study of elementary perception, that the parts of an integrated structure will tend either to look as much alike as possible, or to look as much unlike each other as possible.[6]

In the first case the phenomenon is that of assimilation; in the second, that of contrast. Keeping in mind the direction of inference (person to act or act to person) and the possibilities of assimilation or contrast, we may consider several possibilities of attribution in person perception.

Attributing characteristics to the act based upon the perception of the person. In this situation the perceiver "knows" the person or feels he/she

does. This is to say that the bulk of his/her information is about the person performing the act. The "information" may come from a long time acquaintance with the other; it may come from contact with several people of the group to which the person is assumed to belong; or it may also come from second hand information about the group. In the latter two cases the perceiver is dealing with group stereotypical information.

When the perceiver is faced with an act by this other person, either assimilation or contrast may occur. In the case of assimilation, the act will appear to "fit" with what is known about the agent, and the traits attributed to the person will carry over into the characteristics used to describe the act. Thus, a momentary stumble by a President "known" to be clumsy will be seen as a clumsy act.

In the case of contrast the perceiver has difficulty fitting the act to what he/she knows about the agent. The act is seen as even more different from the "standard" expected than it actually is. In this case, the act assumes a dramatic quality. Thus, when a person assumed to be quiet is finally heard, his/her words may take on much more of an impact than they would have had if they had come from a "talkative" person.

From the studies on ego involvement and perception,[7] we may surmise that the higher the ego involvement of the perceiver, the greater will be the tendency toward either assimilation or contrast. Thus, a woman's husband is more likely than the man on the street to see her act as overly quiet or aggressive.

Attributing characteristics to the person based upon the characteristics of the act. In this situation the perceiver knows very little about the other person. He/she is in a position of needing to decide about the character of the person based upon observations of the act. In the case of assimilation,

then, a trait attributed to the act is then attributed to the person. If the act has caused the perceiver harm and the perceiver can in no way see him/herself as cause of the act, then the other person may be viewed as "aggressive."

In the case of using the act to attribute characteristics to the actor, Heider feels that contrast is not likely to occur.[8] In some cases, however, there may be a pressure toward contrast if the perceiver can shift some of the cause onto the environment.[9] For example, contrast may occur if an interviewee's talkativeness is seen as resulting from the pressure of the interview situation rather than from the actual talkative nature of the person.

Influence of attribution on the disposition of the perceiver. In Heider's theory, a specific behavior may be associated with (attributed to) another person, the environment, or oneself.[10] The location of the attribution will influence a person's predisposition to respond (i.e., his/her attitude). For example, a person who is fired may attribute the situation to the malevolence of another employee, to pressures in the economy, or to his/her own deficiencies. In the first case, the result may be an aggressive verbal or nonverbal act; in the second, a fatalistic feeling; in the third, introspection and/or self-deprecation.

Influence of attitudes on attribution. Attitudes and one's own personality characteristics will influence the attributions that a person makes. Attitudes and personality characteristics are usually influenced by the culture to which one belongs. For persons who have a need to keep the ego level high, there may be a tendency to attribute high value acts to oneself and low value acts to the environment or to the other person. Rationalization, projection, and scapegoating may occur in these cases. For persons who have a need to keep the ego level low, low value acts are more frequently attributed to oneself.[11]

Attribution, then, is a complex process in which past experiences with the person may influence assumed characteristics of the act or in which past experiences with the act may influence the assumed characteristics of the actor. Attribution appears to influence the personality of the perceiver and vice versa. It is within such a dynamic process that the differences of male and female communication behavior occur.

The Application

As we indicated previously, there are specific differences in the communication behavior of males and females in the U.S. These differences have existed over time and most probably have led to and reinforced the notion of expected behaviors for each sex. In a sense, then, these differences and role expectations may constitute a behavioral stereotype for each of the sexes.

With a culture, too, certain situations conjure up a set of expected behaviors. In situations where males have historically occupied the roles involved, the expected behaviors are necessarily those of males. In situations where both males and females have been present, a complementary set of expected behaviors may have emerged to facilitate interaction. As females enter areas previously dominated by males or as females and males change their behaviors in previously complementary situations, pressure is placed on the process of attribution. The professional environment reflects a situation of the first type; the home, a situation of the second type.

The professional situation. Using the finding that men interrupt more frequently than women,[12] we may take selected instances of interruption to demonstrate how attribution might occur. In the context of a board meeting on the topic of hiring, the female's soft interruption, made with subvocal and nonverbal sounds, may not be heard at all. If the men do notice the woman's vocal cues, they may attribute the meaning of agreement to her behavior. In

this case assimilation is occurring as the men take what they know about this specific woman, or about women in general, and use the information to attribute meaning to her behavior. Since "quiet" and "conforming" people tend not to interrupt, the behavior, if noticed, is viewed as quiet, conforming behavior.

This "quiet" woman, however, may finally abandon her nonverbal cues and say, loudly enough to be heard (which may have to be more loudly than if she were not a quiet person), "Before this discussion goes any further, I need to make an observation." At this point contrast may occur, and the men may view the interruption and the observation as much more important or dramatic than the woman intended them. The men may view this as being a "hot" topic for her--one they will make an effort to avoid in her presence in the future. The topic itself may actually be less important to the woman than is her need to be heard.

Attribution also occurs from the behavior to the person, and it often seems difficult to break apart the various stages in the process. In the situation cited above, the men may have negative feelings about the act of interruption itself or about the issue raised by their female colleague. They may give a negative trait name to the act, for example, calling the act a pushy or aggressive behavior. The trait given to the act is then associated with the person. Assimilation has occurred and the woman becomes known as an aggressive, pushy person.

As noted previously, contrast is not likely to occur when the act is used to attribute characteristics of the person. In the situation cited above, however, the sensitive male may in fact see the woman's act as a function of the situation. He does not view the woman who finally interrupted as aggressive, but rather a victim of the circumstances--in this case a conversation

with few pauses given for turn taking. Or she may be seen as a "weak" person pushed to the extreme by the meeting.

In looking at these hypothetical cases of attribution, we should discuss an example of the potential effect which personality can have on the attribution process. Males, in the United States appear to have been acculturated to place and maintain a higher value on their own ego than have women. If the statement made by the woman is one which may threaten the man, the theory suggests that he is apt to scapegoat or resort to other ego-defensive measures. The ego sensitive male then is likely to place blame for the "disrupted" meeting squarely on the female. The female, in turn, acculturated to place a lower value on ego, is very likely to shoulder the blame and apologize.

The home situation. The home arena differs in at least two ways from the business situation. First, the participants may be more ego-involved in the interactions. Second, the changes in feminine behavior are occurring within a complementarily defined set of rules.

As was indicated earlier, it seems reasonable to assume that high ego involvement will result in greater pressures toward assimilation or contrast. In order to be noticed the "quiet" wife may therefore have to escalate her interruption much further than did the woman in the business conference. When her voice is noticed, the loudness may trigger a comment from her husband along the lines of, "You certainly are bitchy today." If the contrast becomes too great, there may be more pressure to place the blame on the environment: "Those pushy feminists have really been getting to you."

Because the male-female roles in the home situation have a complementary tradition, a change in the role of one sex may necessitate a change of behavior in the partner. If the wife seeks to talk more, the man will necessarily have to listen more unless both are to talk at once or the wife is to talk to her-

self. If the change is an uncomfortable one for him, he may locate the origin of the change in his wife and initiate aggressive action (verbal or nonverbal) against her: "Won't you shut up!" If the focus of the changes is placed in the environment, the husband may lash out against "fate": "Why is it those damned feminists are stirring trouble in every class you attend?" The most positive attribution from the perspective of the feminist movement, however, occurs when the male locates a portion of the source of discomfort in himself and in the nature of his previously acculturated role. The ability to do this appears to rest in part on the ability of the individual male to separate the elements of the situation and to integrate the desired attribution with his needed ego level.

The examples outlined above are hypothetical. To our knowledge, no one has tested the influence of attribution and ego involvement in mixed sex groups in business or in the home situation. Attribution theory, however, does appear to offer some interesting initial explanations of situations which are increasingly coming to the attention of workers and spouses in the U.S.

Field Sensitivity and Field Independence

Although the discussion so far has hinted at cultural differences in attribution, the theory itself has not yet been critiqued from a cultural perspective. In the remaining section, we will consider briefly the concepts of field sensitivity and field independence and suggest that they be considered in assessing the cross-cultural applicability of Heider's theory.

Field dependence and field independence were concepts discussed by Witkin and colleagues in their works on "psychological differentiation."[13] Field dependence refers roughly to the tendency to approach perception globally, without much separation of figure and ground. Field independence refers to a perceptual approach which involves articulation and separation of elements in

the perceptual field. Witkin and others found that there were individual, sexual and cultural differences in these tendencies.

Feeling that Witkin's labeling and discussion of these tendencies placed unnecessary and ethnocentric value on field independence over field dependence, Ramirez and Castaneda[14] relabeled the latter concept "field sensitivity." From their discussion and the sources which they cite, it seems reasonable to associate field sensitivity with right-brain synthetic approaches and field independence with left-brain analytic approaches. Ramirez and Castaneda agree with Witkin that cultures may exhibit tendencies toward one approach or the other and that child-rearing practices appear correlated with these tendencies.

The question, then, for the present discussion is whether Heider's theory tends to assume either the field sensitive or field independent approach to perception. To the degree that it assumes the field independent approach, it may be misrepresentative of the person perception of many women[15] and of those cultures which tend toward field sensitivity.

Clearly, the theory itself is analytical in nature as it considers the elements of social perception and the possibility of persons serving as "background" for the judgment of acts.[16] But Heider also seems to assume a world made up predominantly of analytic types. Although "global first impressions" occur, we strive eventually to "cognize a person's traits, and especially his wishes, sentiments, or intentions from what he does and says."[17]

Also, Heider refers to a study in which the subjects attributed human characteristics to dots in a motion picture.[18] This projective situation seems akin to the Rorschach test, a test in which Witkin found that field independent children were "more likely than children with a global approach to impose organization."[19] Thus, a tendency possibly assumed by Heider as universal may, in fact, be more characteristic of field independent types.

Last, Heider refers to the specific defense mechanisms of rationalization, projection and scapegoating in relation to attribution when there is a need to keep the ego level high.[20] Witkin, however, suggests that intellectualization, projection and rationalization are defense mechanisms of the field-independent and that denial and massive repression are mechanisms used by persons with a global approach.

To use this contrast as evidence that Heider assumes field independence is weak in two regards. First, the support for Witkin's claim in this area is weak. Second, Witkin's division of mechanisms may be reflective of the superiority which he implicitly ascribes to field independence. Nevertheless, in light of the other aspects of Heider's discussion mentioned above, his choice of defense mechanisms is interesting.

There is at least one area in which Heider appears to be considering the field sensitive person. Heider cites the gestalt psychologists' use of maximum- and minimum articulation[21] and he makes his own observation that

> contrast or dissimilation occurs when the origin is taken as the standard for judging the quality of the act. We can assume in these cases the fusion between act and origin is less complete and the act is perceived, so to speak, with the origin as background.[22]

From these usages, we may entertain the possibility that tendency toward assimilation may correspond to field sensitivity and tendency toward contrast, or dissimilation, may correspond to field independence.

Simply put, the degree to which Heider's theory rests on important culture-bound assumptions is as yet unclear. A careful reading seems to indicate that he may be assuming a field independent nature. Ironically, even Witkin, who has tested his theory cross-culturally, seems to imply the superiority of field independence. In the interests of intercultural sensitivity it is fortunate that Ramirez and Castaneda shifted the orientation of Witkin's work.

What may now be warranted is a similar reconsideration of Heider's theory with particular attention given to the question of whether and how sexes and cultures differ in their tendencies toward assimilation and contrast.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See Nancy Henley and Barrie Thorne, (eds.) She Said/He Said: An Annotated Bibliography in Language, Speech and Non-Verbal Communication (Pittsburgh, PA: KNOW, Inc., 1975).

[2]Examples of differences which have been discovered include more metaphorical and interpretive language in women's speech, differences in specialized vocabulary in role-related areas, more intensive adverbs used in women's speech, more tentative language in women's speech, more interruption by men than by women, smiling as more prevalent among women, and more limited use of space and gestures by women.

[3]Sharon Ruhly, "The State of the Union: Investigation of United States Literature Relating to German-United States Intercultural Communication" (Paper presented at the Vth International Colloquium on Verbal Communication, Tampa, 1976).

[4]Fritz Heider, "Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality," in Person Perception and Interpersonal Behavior, Ed. by Renato Tagiuri and Luigi Petrullo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 1.

[5]Ibid., p. 5.

[6]Ibid., p. 8.

[7]For example, Muzafer Sherif and Carl I. Hovland, Social Judgment: Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Communication and Attitude Change (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961).

[8]Heider, "Social Perception," p. 10.

[9]It is sometimes argued that use of the passive in Spanish (se me rompio el plato) allows this shifting to occur more readily than in English.

[10]Heider, "Social Perception," p. 12.

[11]Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[12]See Barbara Westbrook Eakins and R. Gene Eakins, Sex Differences in Human Communication (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1978), pp. 66-72.

[13]See Witkin, Herman A.; Dyk, R. B.; Faterson, H. F.; Goodenough, D. R.; and Karp, S. A., Psychological Differentiation, Studies of Development (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1962) and Witkin, Herman A., "A Cognitive-Style Approach to Cross-Cultural Research," International Journal of Psychology, XX (1967), 233-50.

[14]Ramirez, Manuel III; and Castaneda, Alfredo, Cultural Democracy, Bicognitive Development and Education (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

[15]Witkin ("A Cognitive-Style Approach") cites several studies which found women to be more field-dependent than men.

[16]Heider, "Social Perception," p. 10.

[17]Heider, Fritz, "Perceiving the Other Person," in Person Perception and Interpersonal Behavior, Ed. by Renato Tagiuri and Luigi Petrullo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 23.

[18]Ibid. The study which Heider cites is that of Heider and Simmel, "An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior," American Journal of Psychology, (LVII), 243-259.

[19]Witkin, et al., Psychological Differentiation, p. 113.

[20]Heider, "Social Perception," pp. 14-18.

[21]Ibid., p. 8.

[22]Ibid., p. 9.